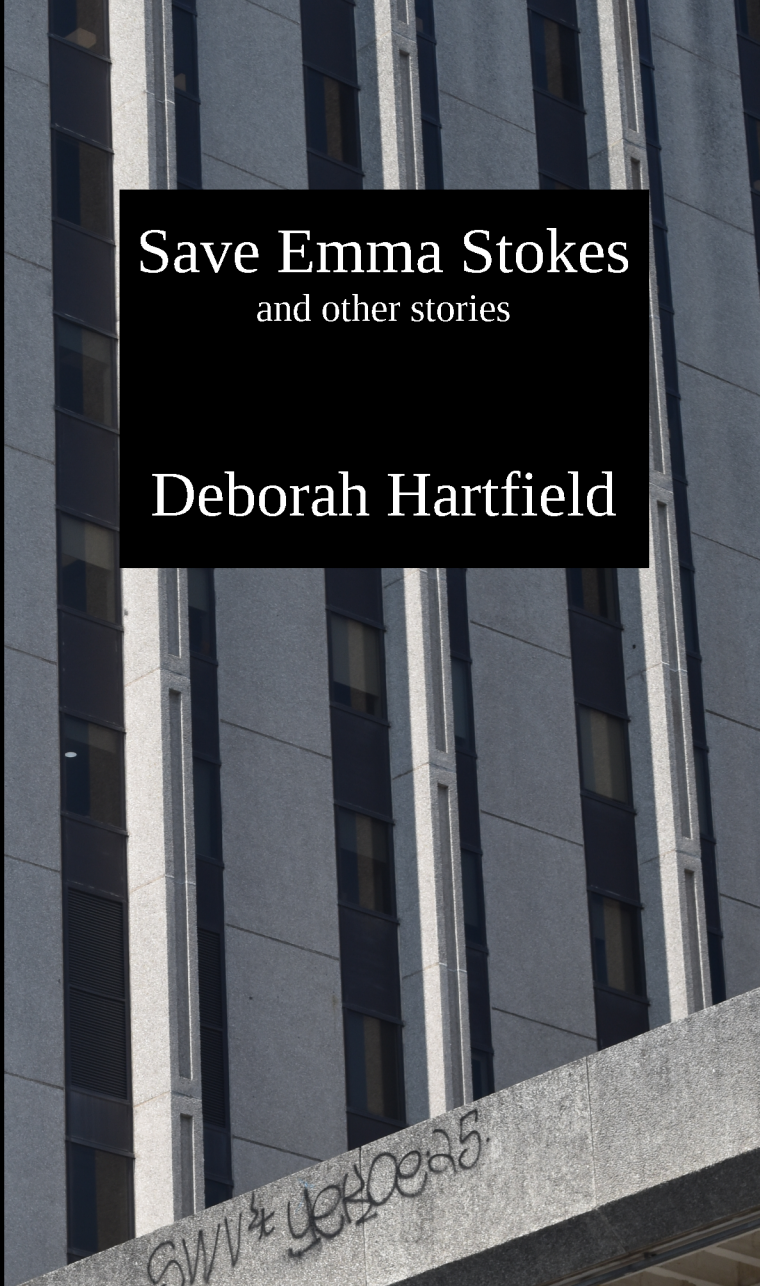

Save Emma Stokes

and other stories

Deborah Hartfield

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[Content Warnings: Blood, Physical Violence, Sexual Violence, Misogyny, Suicide, Nuclear War, Murder, Death]

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INT: EVENING, Bridgets Apartment

Bridget is sexily lounging around in her apartment. Nipples are visible through shirt.
Bridget hears a knock on the door, opens it to find Mark

Bridget
Mark! What on earth are you doing here this late?

Mark
Good evening Bridget. You forgot your coat.

Bridget
That's so kind of you, aren't you a bit cold? Why don't you come in?

Mark
(whilst trying not to look at bridgets breasts) Well if you insist, I'll be more than pleased to join you.

Mark has a throbbing erection, it is left ambiguous whether or not Bridget has noticed this.

"Are you sure we can use throbbing?" I say, my hand up at the writers table.
"What do you mean Bridey?" Rob sits up from his chair, just to stretch his legs.

“One of the quotas introduced last year, about penis size?”

BBC Adult Quality In Broadcasting standard D8-H57; Fair representation of male genitalia: In order to promote positivity and acceptance of male bodies, and to help alleviate the male mental health crisis, a limit is placed, on a department wide level, on how many male actors with penises considered large are cast within BBC Adult productions.

“I don’t quite remember who was at the all hands last sprint” Moss says “But Angie did a talk on where we were at with current quotas, and I think that one had nearly been reached”

“Think it got used up with the Doctor Who remake” Ken snorts “The Cybermen got a bit too enhanced”

“Good shout Moss” Rob says “You think you can double check where we’re at with that quota and then circle back to us?”

“I can check now on the portal” Moss says, opening their laptop.

“Well I think the word Throbbing implies a certain physicality” I point out “And at this point in the writing we should be size agnostic with our language, so as to not force castings hand”

“Very true Bridey” Rob sits back down “So instead of throbbing, how about excited down below?”

“A slight bulge appears in Marks crotch?” Ken suggests.

“Slight is still implying a size right?” Moss says.

“Well it could be a small penis fully erect or a large penis only slightly erect”

“Why don’t we put Mark has a visible erection” I say “And leave that open to interpretation down the line?”

“Sounds good to me” Rob says “Also gonna order a coffee while I’m here, anyone else want in?”

We all nod no.

Rob opens up his phone “One latte, large, and send in the clown” Rob says, he places his phone down “Alright, lets get on with it”

INT: EVENING, Bridgets Apartment

Mark has a visible erection, it is left ambiguous whether or not Bridget has noticed this.

Bridget walks into her kitchen.

Bridget
Milk and no sugar?

Mark enters the kitchen to find Bridget bent over, searching through a cabinet. Mark tries to not look at her ass.

Mark
Oat Milk, I’m on a dairy free diet right now. Read one too many horror stories of the effects of livestock agriculture on the destruction of the Amazon. Morally that’s not something I want to be complicit in.

Bridget stands up with a jug of oat milk

Bridget
This good enough for you

Bridget spills some of the oat milk on her shirt, specifically over her breasts, making them even more visible

Bridget
Oh shit

"Is this before the watershed?" Rob asks.
"Let me get the spreadsheet up" I say.
"Doubt they'll be putting this on prime time" Ken remarked "They've only the four of us here"
Moss looked up from their laptop "It says on the spreadsheet it's for a casual daytime audience"
"How'd you get there so fast" I ask Moss "I'd barely scrolled half the way down there"
"You can sort by column in the data tab" Moss replies.
"Of course" I say.
"Fantastic work Moss" Rob says. The door opens as Fluffy the clown walks through, a single coffee on its tray. Bells jingling it walks over and places it by Rob. Bouncing back up, the clown puts on its silent expression. White face paint framing the open mouthed smile it's kind made whenever it expected some kind of gratitude.
"Are you fucking kidding me?" Rob stood up "I ordered a large, this is a medium, you fucking clown" His hand struck its painted face, the slap reverberated around the meeting room. "Did they electroshock every last braincell out of you jesus fucking christ! You had one job! Get me a fucking large or I'll send

you back to the circus do you understand you mute shit" Spitting disgust at its face, Rob sits back down as Fluffy left the room, the frown on its face would have been heartbreaking if it were on a person. A silence sat in the room for a moment longer.
"Sorry about that" Rob says "Anyway, if we can't use shit, any ideas?"
"Oh crickets?" Ken suggests.
"Doesn't fit" Rob says.
"Oh shoot?" I say
"Could work" Rob says "Bit boring"
"How about" Moss put their hand up "Oh silly me"
"It's playful, flirty" Rob paused "I like it"

INT: EVENING, Bridgets Apartment

Bridget spills some of the oat milk on her shirt, specifically over her breasts, making them even more visible

Bridget
Oh silly me

Mark
My dear you've made quite the mess, let me get that for you

Mark grabs some tissues and starts dabbing Bridgets shirt, trying to not touch her breasts. Mark is ignoring that Bridgets breasts are in his face

Bridget

I think you've missed a spot, a bit to the left?

Mark realises he's placed his hand on Bridgets breasts.

Bridget

Actually I think I've made such a mess, I might as well just take the whole thing off

Bridget goes topless
Mark looks like he's about to ejaculate

Mark

I think I may have made a mess of my own, downstairs

"It's coming up to twelve now" Rob says "We made a lot of progress today, call it and go for lunch?"
I gather my stuff and pack it into my bag, and as Ken tries to make small talk, there's a wince or knowing look between Rob and Moss. It means nothing, so I leave for lunch, after all I don't want to be late for Angie.

2

Chatter echoed around the cafeteria on the second floor. I had gotten my usual lunch of a kombucha and egg salad with a vegan sausage roll, all washed down with lemon chai. Sat in one of the pods that overlooks the reception, I people-watch the plaza below as the midday sun shone through the long and tall windows of the atrium at the heart of the building.

Angie, radiant as ever, was asking her way through the buffet. Covering my mouth as I chew, I watched her strut down the aisle in a sharp black dress. One of the clowns serving her was being stubborn again. This one, the one with it's cheeks painted blue and a long stripy hat, seemed to be making a point of not listening to what she was asking it to do. Sometimes we joked about about how easy our lives would be if the clowns could speak, but then again you should be careful for what you wish for.

Angies tray clatters down on the table as she sits opposite to me.

"Morning Angie" I say "How's your morning been?"

"Had to circle back with Clive in finance, apparently we gave out one too many grants"

"How did that happen? Misalignment?"

"The shortlist teams never agreed on a limit" Angie placed some food into her mouth, before wiping any crumbs off her face left off with a napkin. Me and Angie had been at the BBC for years, we both started on the same day, clicked immediately, nearly got made redundant together during the layoffs a bit over a decade ago now, but both sneaked into the Adult

department to save our skins, and we'd been here ever since!

"How was the anniversary?" I ask.

"Oh wonderful Bridey" Angie let out a little laugh "It really was, you know 14 years me and Mark have been together now"

"Really quite impressive"

"Yes, although I had a really funny call with my mum, I said it was my anniversary coming up and my mum was like, wasn't that a couple months back? Turns out she's still counting it from our wedding"

"And you count it from your second date"

"Yes! You know Bridey my Mum's so traditional, but it really was just signing a bit of paper for us!" Angie smiled off over the reception "You know it's a really nice view from up here I get why it's you favourite seat"

I nod as my mouth is full.

"Sorry I just feel like I'm talking at you Bridey" Angie says "Have you been alright? Have you and Rob had a chat?"

"Not outside of work" I say.

"Oh sorry about that, it was only a few weeks since you went for drinks right?"

"2 months and 4 days"

"And he never just had a chat to clear up how he felt and if you were just friends?"

"No Angie, not once, he just acted like it never happened"

"That's atrocious" Angie places her hand on my shoulder "You know I think this Robert's a bit of an asshole, any man would be the luckiest man in the

world to have you, he doesn't know what he's missing"

My head in my hands, tears almost well up. I take in a deep breath and recompose myself "It'll be fine, he can just be my co-worker, plenty more fish in the sea"

"Are you sure?" Angie says "We can talk about it more?"

"No it's fine, it's in the past"

"Of course" Angie nodded, almost pausing before she spoke "By the way, has anyone mentioned anything else to do with Rob recently?"

"No" I say "What do you mean?"

"I didn't want to be the one to break this to you, but…"

"Angie just tell me" I say.

"Rob and Moss went to drinks together"

"When?"

"I think the latest one was last friday"

"They've been getting drinks this whole time?"

"Yes" Angie nodded solemnly "Sorry I didn't know how to tell you this without hurting you"

Tears reappeared once more at the corners of my eyes "Rob only got drinks with me on a Tuesday"

Angie reached over to comfort me once more "Listen Bridey, Robs only doing it because of one of the quotas"

BBC Adult Quality In Broadcasting standard J3-T90; Guidelines for heterosexual relations in the workplace; While personal relationship of a romantic and/or sexual nature are nominally permitted between employees, there is a risk of personal issues affecting employee activities. A quota of a maximum of one

heterosexual relationship per employee per quarter is enforced. BBC Adult understand that historically non-heterosexual relations have always had different interpersonal dynamics and so they are not impacted by this quota. There are additional guidelines for LGBTQ+ relationships, E4-Z90, and for relationships with clowns, Q1-F56.

"If Moss is all they're cracked up to be" Angie sat around my side to put an arm around me "There would be a quota about it. I'm sure Rob will be wasting some other womans time come next quarter"

Tears came up, but not much. For god's sake I'm an adult woman, I can't be spending the rest of my life like this. Every god damn year there's some tosser that'll break my heart, I swear it happens annually, thought I would have grown up by now.

"Tell you what Bridey" Angie says, she hands me a tissue "There's a new circus that's opened up a couple stops away"

Sat up now, I wipe away the tears "I never really liked going"

"Well this ones different, it prioritises stress relief. Last week Mark was starting an argument about something, you know he wanted to rearrange the deck chairs and tables, something really stupid like that, and he just went on and on about it. Anyway to cut a long story short he really stressed me out, not happy about it, made him sleep on the spare bed. Anyway so I went to this new circus and Bridey, you wouldn't believe the stuff they have there"

I look up at Angie "I'll be fine. I'm not that into clowns, you know, I won't judge you if you are, but it's not for me"

Angie came in to give me a hug “Sure, well I gotta rush off now, I’m going to that circus after work tonight by the way. So if you do change your mind, just let me know”

Sunlight had moved to the wall of the reception, getting up from the table I pick up my bag and collect my tray, and move to where the bins are. As I scrape the detritus into the bins tucked into the corner of the cafeteria, I hear one of Kens snorts over a low wall.

“Tell you what” Rob says “It was bonkers”

“Did you get, you know?” Ken asks.

“For a third date it wasn’t so bad”

“All the way?” Ken could barely contain his excitement.

“Between you and me Ken” Rob pauses “Got balls deep in the thussy”

I can’t listen to another word of this. Putting my tray down I walk in the other direction, down whatever corridor, far away from where those two snivelling idiots would be. Tears appear once more, there’s a seat I find, tucked in a corner. Sat down I try not to cry again. I take out my phone and send a message to Angie.

“Hey, how far is that Circus again?”

3

At the end of a cul-de-sac that branches off an alley around the corner from a tube stop down the line from work, stands a grey long worn-out door. Only the chill evening air between me and Angie, standing still, I watch her walk up and give three rasping knocks. She stands back beside me, and we wait.

Creaks, bells, whistles and slides sound out behind the door. It opens. A short staircase leads down to a long dark corridor stretching onwards. Angie smiles at me as she enters.

"Come on" she says. I follow.

We walked without saying a word, passing a cold electric light every minute or two. Steps calling quietly on the long concrete floor.

"Bit of a trek" I say "Do you think this is the exit as well?"

"Shh" she says "You are ruining the ambience"

"Well sorry, I just thought that people went to the circus to have fun, and so far I am not getting the impression of fun"

Angie says nothing. We walked in silence for a moment more, reaching the end of the corridor. Another door stands brooding before us. Angie pushed it open and went beyond.

"Come on" she says on the other side.

I enter what must be some kind of reception. A low ceiling just above our heads, there were seats, cheap plastic things, but nobody was sat on them. All the walls were the same cold concrete, except for the far one, draped in stripey tent fabric and fairy light, all

framing the desk. A clown sat behind it. Angie walked over.

"The usual" she says. The clown types something into its computer, before producing a card reader. Angie taps it with her card. The clown takes it back and gets up from its seat. It returns a moment later and hands Angie a key. Fabric beside the desk is drawn back, revealing a door. Angie opens it, looking over to me, she beckons me, asks, calls, begs. I follow.

The concrete in this corridor had been painted over, in loud dazzling colours, the lights fill it with a warm pretty glow. We pass door after door, counting up the numbers on them, till Angie stops. The number on this door matches the number on her key. We pass through a door one final time.

Damp hangs in the air, a lone light bulb illuminated the white paint peeling off the walls, another cheap plastic chair left empty. Atop a bare mattress sat a clown. It was beautiful, in a sad way, what light there was in the room revealing the tears painted on its face. It smiled at Angie as she paced over to it, her hand raising its chin. She sat beside it on the mattress, it's mouth agape, a blank look in it's eyes, Angie brushed its hair behind it's ears.

"You're gorgeous" She says, her hand placed between it's thighs. Picking up the plastic seat, I sit beside the wall and watch. Angie pulls its underwear down its long legs, the blank looks of the clowns face turns to anticipation, she pushes its thighs open. Leaning down, I saw what was below there, taken

aback by the hole before me, it really does look like a real vagina.

I figured in the decades we've had the clowns that we must've gotten good at it, the surgery. It was supposed to be a deterrent, a compromise so awful nobody wanted to go through with it, but every year they kept signing up. Boys you knew, a quiet co-worker, a friend's ex-husband, smart lads with their whole lives before them would throw everything away just to be, well, a clown. Whatever is before me was once someone's son, and now it's just, well, that thing.

Remembering now, all those decades ago, there was a whole movement about breaking down whatever gender roles we had left, so that every man, woman and non-binary was truly equal, free to love whoever, to be whatever. It was liberating, exciting even! My cousin is happily in a throuple, my niece started calling himself a man, James even wears skirts into the office on a Friday.

And it was almost incredible, a completely peaceful and agreeable revolution in how we all lived. Almost. There were these men, men who insisted they were women. Men who mistook their performance for reality. Men who where so close to ruining it, derailing the whole revolution. So there was a compromise, they could have their vaginas, live in permanent performance, at the cost of everything else. These men didn't want to be men, but they couldn't be women, so we gave them the offer of being a clown. They had to give up being a man, their humanity, their voice, any chance of living a full life. And they took it, they took the offer, they're still

taking the offer and by any and all measures the clowns are here to stay.

The clown programme was meant to be temporary, just a band aid until the problem got morally mandated out of existence. It was over-subscribed, year on year more and more signed up. A million clowns and no idea what to do with them. So we compromised, the clowns stayed, we put them to work, sometimes you would see one you knew from when it was a boy, a horrifying fact hidden in plain sight. Along the way we got used to it, and now I don't know what we'd be without it.

I sat and watched as Angie had her way with the clown.

4

INT: EVENING, BRIDGETS BEDROOM
Bridget and Daniel are making love in her bed
Mark walks in on them holding a coat
Bridget notices Mark and stops to look at him

Bridget
Mark?

Daniel
Mark!

Bridget
Mark don't look, it's not what it looks like

Daniel
You can have closer look if you wanna be sure, I don't mind

Mark
(holding out coat) You forgot this

Bridget
I can explain, I was going to have a conversation, but, you know, things happened

Mark
And what is this thing that is happening? You know bridget, I thought we were making plans,

plotting out a future together, and you decided to what, just throw it all away?

Bridget

I hoped we were still planning a future together

Mark

I was with you there, Bridget, before this, well, interruption

Daniel gets out of the bed, fully nude

Daniel

Now please excuse me, Mark, but if you want to talk about an interruption, I'd say me and Bridget were in the middle of something before you, well, barged in. A bit rude if you ask me.

Mark

You were fucking my girlfriend

"Perhaps Mark should be a bit more polite here?" I say, putting my hand up at the writers table "It seems a bit more consistent with his character"

"What do you mean by that?" Rob says, he sinks into his chair, swivelling over to Moss.

"I think he'd find a more polite, yet pained, way of saying that" I say.

"Well Mark has reached a breaking point" Moss says "So if there were any point in the plot in which he would break character it would be now"

Moss seems so smug saying that, they look back over to Rob and smirks, just ever so slightly. I keep my eyes on them.

"I think there's a better way in phrasing this break" I say "As in he wouldn't immediately resort to swearing"

Moss turns their glare over to me, there is a silence in the meeting room, permeated by nothing but a postage clown pushing its trolley in the corridor outside.

"There's clearly been a misunderstanding of the characterization on your part" Moss says, they turn over to Ken "What do you think Ken?"

"I think he'd say fuck" Ken says.

"Sound good to me!" Rob says finally

INT: EVENING, BRIDGETS BEDROOM

Daniel

Now please excuse me, Mark, but if you want to talk about an interruption, I'd say me and Bridget were in the middle of something before you, well, barged in. A bit rude if you ask me.

Mark

You were fucking my girlfriend

Daniel walks over to Mark
Daniels erect penis swinging

Daniel

Oh I'm sorry, I promise she won't be your girlfriend soon

Mark tries to not look at Daniels erect penis

Mark
And can you put that away?

Daniel
My apologies (to camera) someone had a quota to fill

Mark
Who the hell do you think you are?

Daniel
(Smugly) Daniel Cleaver

Mark
Is this all one big joke to you?

Daniel
It's a little funny

"I think the dialogue here could be a bit punchier" Moss says.
"How so?" Rob says.
"Well it seems a bit stuffy" They say "The worlds should be rolling off the tongue, maybe only two or three words per line?"
"I'm not so sure about this?" I say.
"So Moss we want snappier dialogue, that's what we should go for?" Rob says.
"Oh completely, we want to build tension, so the dialogue should pick up the pace with it" Moss says.
"I think we're already doing this?" I say.

Rob turns to Ken “What do you think about Moss’s idea?”
“Seems alright I suppose” He replies.

Mark
And can you put that away?

Daniel
My apologies (to camera) someone had a quota to fill

Mark
Shut it!

Daniel
Do I have to?

Mark
Get out!

Daniel
Rather not

Mark
You bastard

Mark throws a punch at Daniel
Mark and Daniel begin to tussle
They fall onto the bed
Mark is on top of Daniel, pinning him down

Daniel
Well this is fun

Mark
I’m going to obliterate you

Daniel
Has any one ever told you what beautiful eyes you have

Mark pauses before leaning into kiss Daniel

Bridget
Well I'm glad you two have made up!

Rob lets out a long sigh. "Well it's nearly five, wanna call it a day here?"

"Sounds alright to me" Ken says.

Moss nods as well. Rob and Ken pack up their stuff, and get up to go. For a minute it's just me and Moss in the room. We don't say anything. I finish off an email, Moss finally gets up to leave. I follow.

5

It's still light outside when I catch up to Moss. They'd made their way down the long corridors of the office into the hot seating area. It's empty, just us two in the wide open void.

"Hey Moss" I say, placing myself beside them "Did you have fun with the session today?"

"Oh of course Bridey!" They turn to face me, eyes piercing "I'm just rushing off"

"Got anything nice planned?" I ask.

"What do you mean?" They took a step back.

"I mean are you going straight home? Having a nice bath with the cats?" I say.

Moss turns away from me, then back, their lips stay unmoving, they sour and hiss.

"Oh sorry just making a joke Moss, it's alright if your allergic to cats you know, lots of people are"

"I'm going home, if that's what you want to know" Moss says.

"That's nice" I say. We stand in silence for a moment. "Oh Moss, you hate me right?"

"What?" They say.

"Well just now, in the meeting where you putting me down" I say "Are you fucking Rob?"

"What?"

"Are you and Rob, you know" I make the gesture where I put my index and thumb in a circle, and the repeatedly thrust my other index figure through the circle.

"Fine Bridget" Moss says "Yes we're fucking, we fuck, we've fucked 4 times now, it's great, I love fucking Rob, I love being fucked by Rob"

“Do you love him?”
“What the fuck are you talking about?”
“Well, I mean, is it serious? The Fucking?”
“What do you want to know next? My home address, my dead name, if my brother joined the circus? Just leave me the fuck alone Bridget”
“No, Moss, what I mean is, I just think that, well, if you think about it, we’re two people in sort of the same boat”
Moss glares at me.
“I know you’re non-binary and everything, but we’re both, you know”
“What!”
“Well I don’t know the right term”
“I am nothing like you” They say “Nothing at all. Is this what you’re trying to do? Form some little sisterhood between us, do some fucking girl power, is that how you see me? Do you really think I want anything to do with you?”
Staring at the ground, I feel rather upset, I thought I was being nice, but they clearly feel otherwise “Well it’s just I’m rather upset about Rob and I didn’t really know how to talk about it, so I’m sorry if it all came out wrong, I just wanted to be nice”
Moss walks around a bit, throwing their arms up into the air “I don’t care. I genuinely don’t fucking care Bridget. Okay, you know what, fuck it, I have been nice to you, I have been so fucking nice to you this whole time, and you know why”
Tears well up again, I nod no.
“It’s not just that I want nothing to do with you, Every fucking day I wake up and wish I don’t turn into a joke like you. Do you think I want to grow up

into some single spinster with a dozen cats reading every book in the local library, dying before I finishing knitting my second nephews jumper”

“That doesn’t sound so bad”

“Fuck you” They spat in my face “Do you think I liked being a women? Do you think I wanted even the slightest chance that I could grow up into some hag like you? I didn’t want to liberate women I liberated myself from being a women. And you know what? Rob told me about you, he said you’re a fucking joke, a nervous wreck, like talking to a bucket of wet slop. Me and Rob though, we’re equals, I’m not a women to him, and that’s why we work. You however are a fucking joke, like seriously Bridget, do you like being a woman?”

I nod yes.

“Hopeless. Utterly fucking hopeless. See this is what I mean, this is what I fucking mean. Like you actually want this, like a fucking clown? Do you like being treated like shit?”

“No” I say “I don’t want anyone to be treated like, well, this, see I was just a bit upset, that’s all”

Moss shoves themselves into my face “I don’t care. For your sake lets pretend this never happened, see you tomorrow, alright?”

6

The long grey door stands before me. Nobody will see me, I say to myself, I take in a deep breath, and open the door to the circus. The long corridor stretches out before me, walking briskly through the damp air, till I reach the reception. It's empty, save for the clown at the desk. They had set up one of those self service touch screens by one of the bare walls.

Scrolling down, they have a lot of options, add-ons, a whole layout of the rooms, but it all went over my head. The clown Angie had was free, so I select it and then go to pay. The clown at the desk hands me the key, and I make my way to the room.

Unsure if it recognises me. The clown from before was where I left it, the stick thin figure laying atop a bare mattress. It looks at me with that same blank stare, unreadable beneath the face paint. The mattress has a fun bounce to it, I sit on the bed beside it.

"Sorry, I came here before, do you remember?"

What would the clown have said if it could speak? Maybe it did know my face, or maybe I was yet another soul lost in the sea of customers that pass through here.

"I'm allowed to touch you, right?"

I got nothing from the clown, maybe a hint of expectation, or was it fear? Maybe that wasn't the point at all? I place my hand on the clowns bare arms, little more than bones.

"You can understand what I say to you?"

It nods. A sign at least. I feel comfort for once.

“I’m so sorry, I made all the effort to come out here, but now I don’t know what to do. I feel like I’m just wasting your time. Am I doing that? Am I wasting your time?”

The clown stares at me.

“Don’t you have an answer? Don’t you want anything? Anything at all? Who even were you? Before?”

The clown keeps staring at me. I let go of its arm.

“I’m sorry” I say, standing up. “I’m so sorry, I‘ve been such a mess, and I feel like I’m always making a mistake” I pace around the room, the clowns eyes never leaving me “And it’s not like I wanted to be in this situation, I don’t want to be forgotten, talked over, yelled at, I don’t get why people think it’s okay to treat me like this, I never chose this, you see”

The clowns eyes stay wide open. It’s been placed on the same spot on the same bed in the same damp room this whole time.

“You chose this though” I say, stopping dead in my tracks “You wanted this. You could have been like Rob, or even Ken. You chose this though.”

The clown has an expression for once, it looks scared.

“I don’t understand why anyone would choose this, especially you. You understand me right?”

Silence sat in the room, both of us still, the clown shook it’s head from side to side, nodding no.

“What do you mean, what the fuck do you mean? You know exactly what I mean by this” My voice starts to shriek “You wanted this, you fucking chose this, you chose this hell, I didn’t but you did”

The clowns legs start to move, crawling back over the bed, it's head turns to the door.

"Look at me" I say, marching towards it "You little shit, look at me" I'm on the bed beside it, grabbing its neck as I push it down. "Don't you fucking dare look away from me"

Its mouth opens as if to scream. I put my whole weight on top of it.

"Don't you fucking dare" I hold up it's face, feeling it in my hand "You know you wanted this, you know this you little shit, right?"

There is fear in its eyes. There is someone there.

"Go on, nod yes, tell me you know"

All it does is try and recoil, I drag its painted face around.

"Tell me, tell me you little shit"

I throw its head down to the bed, so it lays there, under me. It looks at me, before it nods yes.

"You little shit" I hit it, right in the face "You little fucking shit" I hit it again. I watch the clown's face crunch up, the pain it should feel. "You fucking knew you were signing up for this shit, you fucking knew, you fucking knew. This is all just some sick joke to you isn't it?" It tries to move under me "No you fucking don't" As it flinches I grab its chin, pushing it's head up, revealing it's neck. It squirms under me, and I watch, watch the fear in its eyes.

Silence settles, I sit up and get off the bed. Stains on the mattress burn underneath it as the clown sits up, its eyes wandering over the floor until it looks at me. A tear appears on its face, a smile forced.

"Fuck you" I scream "Fuck you, Fuck you Fuck you" Fists fly once more, I lunge onto it, its head

smashing against the bed frame. It rolls off the other side and I follow it down, I follow with my fists and knees and screaming words and I lay into it. The only sound are the thuds of my fists, the slaps of my palms. Stopping to breathe and resting my knees deep into it, I take in the whimpering scene before me.

I realise I now feel rather better about myself, so I get up and leave the room, closing the door behind me.

The Mole

We had vegetable soup for dinner again. Yuk! I'm sick of it, that's all we've had for 2 weeks straight. Everyday Mummy says that us kids should be grateful we're not infected, I told her that I was grateful when Uncle came down with a fox he found above ground and we cooked every last bit of it. Mummy told me off and sent me to bed early, for an eleven year old like me to go to bed before an eight year old like Dylan was infuriating! But I wasn't upset at my little brother because he didn't tell on me when I read under the covers.

One day Mummy and Uncle were doing one of their trips up the stairs to the surface so I had to look after my little brother and make sure he didn't walk into the tracks. The four of us lived in Hampstead Heath tube station. Which is a very long name for a very small place. Sometimes Uncle tells us stories of what it was like before the infection, that people would travel on trains in the tube that would go on the tracks Dylan wasn't allowed to go on. Uncle says that people would use it to get around the city, which is called London, as fast as possible, and it got very crowded when there were lots of people living in London. We lived in the tube station that was under Hampstead Heath, and Hampstead Heath was in London, which meant that all of the other stations on the map on the platform were under London, Mummy said I was very clever when I figured this out.

“I’m bored” Dylan said, frustrated at what toys he had “Imogen how long do we have to stay here?”

“Mummy says one day we’ll leave when it’s safer, if we venture too far away we’ll get infected” I said, trying to focus on my book “And remember what Mummy said? Stay behind the yellow line!”

Dylan groaned, he stared over at one of the big pictures on the wall beyond the tracks, adverts Uncle said they were called. There was a line of important looking people in military uniforms, though nicer than the ones Mummy, Uncle and their friends wore. The caption below said ‘Emergency Declaration from the Provisional Cabinet Office’ but the rest of the advert was missing. The advert next to it had a picture of a pretty girl on it which said ‘AI Chatbot never be lonely again’ but something about the girl didn’t look like it was real, like a really good drawing. Sometimes Mummy and Uncle would bring back toys and books from the surface, but they hadn’t done that recently, they said they must have found everything they could.

“Did you ever see any infected?” Dylan asked me “Before we moved here”

“I told you this, they looked like people, but not really” I said “Mummy said the important thing was that we covered our faces, we tried not to be seen, and if they did see us then we couldn’t move”

“Uncle says if they spot you they can infect you from the other side of the room and you can’t run from it and it hurts really really bad and people barely survive when they get spotted” Dylan said “And the dogs that get infected are really dangerous

cause they run way faster than you, did you ever see the arms the dogs have?"

I didn't like thinking about the dogs, Mummy says those dogs would infect people the most. I had laid eyes on one, I was hiding in the back of Uncles car the night before we moved down here, it's arm grew out of it's back, and if it ever pointed at you, you knew you were already gone. Normally Mummy would say Uncle was trying to scare us with the stories, but she said he was telling the truth about the dogs, and we'd never want to meet one face to face.

The footsteps of the grown ups echoed down the stairs. Turning back around we saw Mummy come down the stairs first. Her gun slung around her back and bag full, her tired eyes beaming as she rushed to hug us.

"Imogen I hope you've looked after your little brother okay?" Mummy said, embracing me.

"Yes, I still don't get why he can't read like I do he keeps getting bored" I replied burying myself into her camo jacket.

"Well he never got the chance to go to school like you did, so you have to be patient with him. Also look what Uncle found"

Uncle walked down, a wide grin below his eyepatch with one hand behind his back, and the other held a bag of ammo, Uncle said he had to collect weapons for our friends in Camden Town station.

"Hey kids look" Uncle said, revealing from behind his back a creature that looked like a pigeon but big and white.

"Uncle found a Swan!" Mummy said.

“What’s that?” Dylan asked “Can we eat it?”
“We’re eating like a king tonight!” Uncle said.
“What, poisoned by the Met?” Mummy said to Uncle, the grown ups both laughed, but I didn’t get what was so funny.

Swan was the nicest dinner we’ve had yet, better than rats, pigeons, foxes and even dogs! Uncle told us stories of infected birds that would infect people from miles away, you couldn’t even see them, the only way to be safe was to only go out when it was cloudy, I told Dylan that clouds were like what your breath makes when it gets cold.
After dinner I was ready for bed, me and Dylan got tucked into our bed in our room with ‘Maintenance’ on it’s door. Drifting off to sleep initially, I woke up a bit later, I knew it wasn’t too late as Mummy and Uncle were still up. Dylan was sound asleep, aside from his soft snoring all I could hear was the whistling of the wind in the tunnels, the crackling of a fire and the grown ups chatting away.
“Today was too close a call” Uncle said “I don’t know how long we can stay here”
“And go where?” Mummy replied “This is the deepest station on this branch we’re impenetrable here”
“I think you should risk it and take the kids north”
“Tom. You know the risks are too great, if we have to go anywhere it’s Camden Town, I’d trust Captain York over whatever is in the ruins up there.”
“Julie you need to be realistic. Last time I visited him he seemed broken. I don’t think the resistance will last long”

“Tom! Where’s this coming from?”
“They’re closing in on us, you know how much I bled today? They’re planning something big”
“We have to keep hope, I’m not saying things are good, but we can’t give up”
“What do you mean?” Uncle asked “What’s bad”
“Captain York thinks there’s a mole” Mummy said. There was silence for a moment or two, I tried closing my eyes, letting the damp darkness sit in the air with me.
“Who do you think it is?” Uncle said.
“When I find out you’ll be the first to know” Mummy replied. There was some more silence, before I heard the fire go out and them call it a night, and soon I drifted off into a deep sleep.

“Kids wake up” Mummy said, shaking me and Dylan in our bunks “You need to get up now” We crawled up out of bed and onto our feet. Mummy was rushing around, handing us food, clothes and a torch. “Pack these into your bags, remember basic training?”
“Where’s uncle?” Dylan said.
“Uncle has gone ahead of you to Camden Town, Imogen I’m going to need you to be a grown-up and take your little brother south down the tunnels until you reach Camden Town station, remember the way on the map?”
I nodded, placing my book in my bag and putting on my big camo coat.
“When you get to Camden Town not only will Uncle be there, but the rest of the resistance, remember me

telling you about Captain York? They'll keep you safe"

Dylans eyes nearly closed again from how sleepy he was, I helped him pack some of his favourite toys.

"Dylan do you want a torch too?" I asked him, giving him one of my spares.

"Kids I'm going to need you to be super quiet, cover your faces? Imogen hold Dylans hands" Mummy led us both out to the platform and down to the tracks "Okay kids that's the tunnel that goes to Camden Town, you're going to go to Belsize Park, then Chalk Farm, and then Camden Town, understand Imogen?"

I nodded, I know how to read a map and I knew how to not get infected so I wasn't very scared, just a bit annoyed that Mummy wouldn't let us lie in before going on a big walk.

"And mask up, don't get infected" Mummy said, pulling our face masks and hoods up. She kissed us both, and with a gun in hand, ran over to the stairs. "Go, now"

Torches in both hands we walked hand in hand down the long turns of the dark tunnel, I shone the torch ahead as Dylan got distracted illuminating all the wires and machinery on the walls.

"Did all of this makes the trains go?" Dylan asked.

"Quiet" I replied "Mum says we have to be silent so the infected don't hear us"

Dylan groaned a bit, and we trundled along in the long cold dark. After a big winding turn, we saw a light at the end of the tunnel. I told Dylan to turn his torch off, and so did I, the rest of the tunnel being dim enough to see. As we got closer I knew it was the

next station, Belsize Park, and I could hear voices from there.

Approaching, we ducked down by the platform, peeking over I saw three figures, one of them was crouching down, he looked like Mummy and Uncle, but I could tell it wasn't either of them, was that one of their friends? Next to him were two infected people, they were in the shape of a person, but it was like a dark mouldy crust had grown over them, and something was growing out of their hands, like a long lump of junk.

I heard the not infected one say something, like when Dylan would plead to stay up longer, and then there was a loud noise and a large flash as I ducked down under the platform. I heard some footsteps, and then cold silence in the white light in the station. Dylan was shaking, and I cuddled him to stop him from crying, I looked over at some of the adverts they had in this station, and there was more of that pretty girl that didn't look fully real, which I found comforting. Poking my head above the platform, the station was empty, except for the person who looked like one of Mummy and Uncles friends, who was lying down. Taking Dylans hand we walked down to the other end of the station, and as we made it to where the dark of the tunnel began, I saw the sign going to Chalk Farm.

"We're on the right track" I said to Dylan, he still seemed scared "We'll be seeing uncle soon"

Deep in the winding dark once more, there was nothing but the echoes of our footsteps. It was colder here now so we kept close, holding his hand tight,

sometimes I'd hear Dylan let out a cry or two. As we turned a corner, there was a little green box glowing in the dark, making our way upto it, it was beside a little corridor leading away from the tracks to a door.

"What's through the door?" Dylan asked.

"I don't know" I said, stepping off the tracks "Why don't we check" Walking up to the door, I turned the handle and realised it was locked. I looked over to Dylan, who'd seemed to be distracted by this, and the warm green glow of the box outside.

Outside I heard something in the dark, a whirring and short steps in the dark, it didn't sound like a person, too fast and light. We turned off our torches, standing in the pitch black shadow by the door, looking at the pale green of the track beside us. The steps had a plodding sound, the crunching grew louder and louder as it came close. A bleak shape entered the green glow next to us. It looked like a dog, just without a head, and it's 4 short legs stopped just before us, and a great arm rising above it. The body stayed still, motionless, and the arm looked around above it, as if it had eyes of it's own. It peered around the tunnel, scanning, turning, till it reached the corridor, and as the arm faced us head on, it seemed so slim viewed from the front. There was a loud noise, and a bright flash, and holding Dylan tight we closed our eyes.

There was no green glow any more. Feeling Dylans body in my arms, I listened for the sound of the dog. It's plodding steps disappeared into the distance. I heard Dylan take in a deep breath.

"What was that?" He asked.

"I don't know" I said "I think we should wait here for a bit"
Turning my torch on, but not shining into the tunnel, I saw Dylans face, and smiled at him. We waited till there had been silence for a while.

Making our way through the tunnel once more, we made it to Chalk Farm. It was empty.
"Do you want to rest here Dylan?" I asked "We can reach Uncle tomorrow, I think we're both tired"
Dylan nodded yes, too shaken to speak. I helped him up to the platform and climbed up after him. Wandering around, we found another room with 'Maintenance' on it, like our room back home, and we made a bed out of coats where our bed would normally be. Taking some food and water out of our bags, we ate what we could, before Dylan settled in to rest, and I read as I watched him drift off to sleep. Tired myself, I took off my coat, used it as a blanket, and cuddled up beside him.

When I woke up Mummy had appeared. Dylan had woken before me so he was sitting in her lap. Seeing her tired smile when she saw me stir, I waved hello.
"I think we saw an infected dog Mummy, I think it infected one of the lights in the tunnel"
"You kept your masks on?" Mummy said
I nodded.
"I'm glad you kept safe" Mummy looked like she was about to cry "We're nearly going to see your uncle! Eat and get your coats on, we need to get a move on"

Stuffing my face and putting my big coat on, we walked out onto the platform.

"Okay Imogen don't let go of Dylans hand okay?" Mummy said.

"What's it like in Camden Town?" I asked.

"You'll be surrounded by friends" She said.

"Are there any friends my age?" Dylan asked.

"Well me and Uncles friends, so no, but everyone is really friendly! We need to get a move on"

Grabbing my little brother's hand, I followed Mummy down on to the tracks, as we made our way to the tunnel, I saw someone walk out into the light.

"I told you to take the kids north what the fuck are you doing here Julie?" Uncle said "Where's your gun"

"I had to leave Hampstead as fast as I could, the occupation was closing in on me, I sent the kids down ahead of me, how is the Captain?"

"Julie if you had taken the kids north you would have been safe okay?"

"And Camden Towns not safe? Tom we've been holding out here for years, what's going on?"

There was thuds and whirring as I saw the two infected people from before walk out behind Uncle, their rusted metallic crusts stomping to a halt. Seeing it close up, I realised now that the things in their hands were guns.

"Tom jesus fucking christ what's going on? What's happened to you?"

"Camden Town has been neutralised Julie"

"There was a Mole wasn't there" Mummy said, I'd never heard her this close to crying before. Dylan leaned into me as I turned around, behind us infected

people and their dogs poured out of the station and onto the platform, although this close they all seemed so metallic.

"Is that the last one?" One of the Infected people next to Uncle asked.

"Yeah, just her, spare the kids please" Uncle responded.

"You little shit it was you wasn't it" Mummy said, screaming now "You were the fucking mole weren't you"

"If you'd taken the kids north you'd have been safe, I'd made sure of it" Uncle said "I always thought you knew it was me"

Save Emma Stokes

Buttoning my shirt over my sports bra, I looked at myself tying my hair back in the mirror and fixed my tie. I was going to do it today, I was going to come out to someone. I didn't have to tell everyone, just one person, just a friend. Breathe in, breathe out, it's not like it's the end of the world.

1

The news came through as I signed, best regards, sending the email off. Over the tops of monitors I could see the frowns on my colleagues faces, turned down one by one, confused glances passed silently between them.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Depa said, watching the headlines roll across the screen as the uniformed figure gave a solemn announcement "I literally had plans this weekend"

"They're supersonic now" Jamie B shrugged, swivelling over in his chair "Could all be dead in minutes"

"This is a prank, okay? Like look at that soldiers uniform" Depa said, pointing over at the hastily drawn map now on the screen, showing the missile paths and the concentric circles centred on our city. "That's just a costume you could buy in any store, I swear Greg will be out any minute telling us we've all been pranked"

I saw Emma pace anxiously down the office, over to where we were all sitting “What the fuck is going on?” She said, opening her laptop to look up the news.

“Seems pretty real to me” Jamie B said.

“Shut up, you’re not helping” Depa spat

“Are we going to get evacuated?” Emma said “Jamie what have you heard?”

“Nah we’re stuck here, so, orgy?” Jamie B said.

“Shut the fuck up” Depa said again.

“Right, Jamie C” Emma said, turning to me “What’s going on?”

“Well” I said, clicking through all the tabs I had open “I’ve checked multiple news agencies from multiple countries” I turn back to Emma “And it seems pretty serious to me, like Warsaw has already been hit, so neither side is backing down”

“We’re right in the city centre too” Depa said “During working hours, can they evacuate us all? Could we shelter in the tube?”

“Who the fuck knows” Jamie B said

“It’ll be a crush down there that’s for sure” I said.

“Signals gone” Emma said, staring at her phone “How the fuck are we supposed to get out of here?”

“Calm down everyone” Depa said “It might actually be a prank don’t worry about it”

A low rumbling made its way from out of the sky, a flock of helicopters flew above us, and across the view out of the window.

“Chinooks” Jamie B said “Think they’re heading for Westminster?”

“It’s the right direction” Depa said “Getting the Prime minister out?”

"Or in" I said "Like they could be getting all the important people together to figure out what's going on?"

"It's all just gonna blow over" Emma said "It's just gonna amount to nothing and we're all going to be able to go home at the end of the day, alright?"

"Or we might all die" Jamie B smirked.

Emma just glared at him. Looking over the office I saw one of the old cleaners, Jackson was his name, we always waved at each other when we passed one another, but we never really spoke more than that. He'd parked his cleaning trolley by one of the stairways and was sitting down on a spare chair, all out of place, deflated.

"One moment" I said, getting up. I went over to Jackson, left alone by the tense chatter around him. "Hey, I'm Jamie C? Wondering how you're doing?"

Jackson looked up with a half smile, then back down, then let out a big sigh "As good as one can be doing, I suppose"

"Well we don't know for sure what might be happening, so it might not all be doom and gloom"

Jackson let out another sigh "Phone signal gone, it went before I even knew what was happening"

I pulled up a seat and sat beside him "That's rough, can't even let anyone know what's going on"

Jackson shook his head, the shock staying on his face. We didn't say anything for a moment or two.

"Hey" Depa said, coming over to us "Greg Havers having an all-hands, think he's gonna explain what's going on, you coming?"

"Yeah sure" I said, turning to Jackson "You coming?"

“You go” He sighed, his whole body withering into the seat “You can fill me in afterwards”

2

The break out room was placed at the far end of the office. They'd first pitched it as part of their mental health awareness campaign a few years back. A few suicides and burn outs had sent HR haywire, but it was only a particularly bad Glassdoor review that made them bring in a couple of mindset consultants. After that the pinball machines and free pizzas started to appear, and sooner or later the far side of the office got cleared and turned into a break out room, a purposefully liminal space to de-stress and kick back, open to all employees at their managers discretion.

There was some tense chatter in the break out room as me and Depa filed in. Squishing between the crowd forming around the small stage on the long side of the room, Greg Havers was with the CEO, Gill Powers, the two of them locked in a chat in front of the projection from one of their laptops. Tucked by an arcade machine me and Depa both looked on as Gill quieted the room to speak.

"I'm so glad you could all join us" Gill said "I'd to take a moment to thank everyone here for, you know, not completely losing our marbles" The CEO let out a nervous laugh "Me and Greg have been trying to find word of what's exactly going on"

"We're all gonna die!" Greg said with a grin.

"He's joking, he's joking everyone, it's all up in the air"

"Just like those nukes! Might as well get pissed" Greg said as a couple 'wa-heys' erupted under the crowds breath.

“As far as we all know” Gill tried to calm us down “This will all just blow over and we’re going to be seeing our families tonight, alright?”

“Sure hope not” Greg said, to another chuckle.

“Now I’m not a tyrant, I’m not going to have you all working up until we all get blasted to smithereens, so there’s no expectation to do any work for the rest of the day. That being said, there has been an order from the authorities to only evacuate if explicitly told to, so I’m afraid we will have to stay put, here in the office, for the time being. Now onto Greg who also has an announcement to make”

Greg lept up to centre stage, shaking hands with Gill as she went to one side.

“Alright” He said “Who here wants to twiddle their thumbs until their brains get blasted”

There was another slight chuckle as the crowd let a silence hang in the air.

“Now who here wants to fucking party!”

The crowd let out a cheer.

“Now Gill here will probably not be the most happy about this” Greg gestured over to her “But me and Jamie T have been keeping a beer stash in the office, for if the occasion demanded it”

“And you’re telling me now?” Gill complained from the sidelines.

“Well I think this is a bloody good occasion, am I right lads?” Greg said, leading the crowd into a roar.

Depa nudged me on my side, she’d pinned herself against the wall, and away from the crowd.

“Emma has disappeared” She said, looking over the room. Turning away and peering over the thriving

heads, I couldn't spot her. I gave Depa a worried look.
"I can help you look" I said.
"Bit worried things are gonna turn, you know, bit nasty"
"Yeah I can see that" I tried giving her a comforting smile. Depa took off through the crowd and I followed, pushing to the other side just as Greg put on some music. Frowning, I realised the party was only getting started.

All 6 six lanes in the road below were going the same way. Going was a funny word, 'all the cars in the road below were pointing one way' would be better, as none of them were moving. The mass were on foot now, marching as fast as it could in the crush. A few more army helicopters flew over above, ferrying anyone important from the centre. A pigeon groomed itself on the windowsill across from me, sitting pretty in a newly built nest.
"A bunch of us are going to the top floor Depa" A voice behind me said "You sure you're alright down here?"
"I'm gonna find some of my friends" Depa replied "Then I'll probably join you"
"Don't wanna die surrounded by a bunch of drunk idiots"
"Yeah same"
"Sure you'll be alright down here whilst we're gone?"
"I'm with my friend" Depa said, grabbing my arm. I turned around to see the group of women Depa had been talking to, specifically the fiercer one at the

front of the group “Tessa, this is Jamie” I watched Tessas’ eyes twitch from side to side “Jamie C. He’s cool, he’s my friend”

“Of course” Tessa said, now in a smile “Jamie C isn’t a name I’m familiar with. Nice to meet you!”

“Nice to meet you too” I said, giving a little wave.

“Great” Tessa said, the smile disappearing as she turned back to Depa “Who are you looking for?”

“You know Emma Stokes? She’s in my team? She disappeared while Gill and Greg were making their speech”

“I haven’t been on this floor much but” Tessa turned around to the women in the group behind her “Anyone else know her? Andrea you’ve been down this floor the longest”

“She’s blonde, medium length hair, kinda short, if you’ve seen her?” Depa said.

“I think I saw her go to the 6th floor with some guys?” Andrea said behind Tessa “Think they’re throwing another party there”

“Cool, Me and Jamie are gonna go check up on her” Depa said “Then we’ll probably join you on the top floor”

“Stay safe” Tessa said.

As me and Depa made it the stairwell door, I spotted Jackson, in another lonely, but also quiet, corner of the office. Swivelling in his chair, he looked out the window, at the blue sky, tranquil in the air. Remembering what I said, I went over to him, Depa not far behind.

“Hey” I said to him “You look very mellow”

Jackson continued staring out.

“I think we just have to wait here till we get evacuated” Depa said.
“Just stay put and not go insane” I said “doesn’t sound too bad right?”
“I can feel it” Jackson said “I can feel it coming”
“A lot of people feel really bad, so I get it if you’re stressed out” Depa said.
“In my bones. Something bad, something evil, It’s coming”
“If you want a quiet space a bunch of people are going to the top floor” I said “If you don’t want to have a party”
“We’re going to find one of my friends” Depa said “But afterwards we’re going to the top floor as well, you can come along if you want?”
Jackson let out another sigh, the old man had a look of defeat on his face “Thanks for telling me, don’t worry about me too much, I’ll walk there myself” He said, getting up from his seat “And I saw your friend” He said, walking away and pointing “She went that way”

The party was in full swing on the other side of the office, hearing the jeers before the actual music. As we passed a corner a couple seemed to be getting off under the desks. The girl wasn’t Emma so we walked on by. Some guys were already smoking indoors, and this one gaggle of colleagues had already made a game of drunkenly standing on the chairs to climb into the ceiling above, before seeing how far they could crawl before falling back out. Jamie G had constructed some rudimentary DJ set on-top of some of the desks, although it did just seem to be playing

whatever music people had downloaded when the signal went out.

"Found her!" Depa said, pointing out into the crowd of guys dancing, most of them already shirtless, one had tied his tie around his forehead. Emma was sitting on a desk on the other side of the crowd, some guys were talking to her but she wasn't saying much back.

Depa took off, and speeding behind her, the two of us made our way through the dancing mass, trying not to smell the alcohol on their breath. Emma didn't seemed to notice us approaching, or be aware of anything else for that matter.

"Emma!" Depa said, pushing through to her, Emmas' face lit up a bit as she approached. I saw one of the guys flinch as Depa intruded, the one with a crowbar in his hand gave me a look. "Are you doing okay?" Depa said.

"It's really loud" Emma replied.

"Want to get out of here?"

Emma nodded yes.

"Do you fucking mind?" The guy with the crowbar said to Depa "I was having a conversation with her. Bit fucking rude" He stumbled on his feet for moment.

"We're leaving now" Depa said to him with a smile "Is that okay?"

"I said that is a bit fucking rude" He said again, taking a misstep towards her.

I saw him clench the crow bar. Where on earth did he get that crowbar from? "Hey" I said to him "Where on earth did you get that crowbar from?"

"Found it" He said.

"Why are you just carrying it around? It's creeping everyone else out"
"The fuck you care?"
"Look I don't think you're thinking straight, it's stressing everyone out, just let it go and enjoy yourself, okay?" I said, reaching one of my hands out, as if to comfort him. Depa and Emma had already made it to the other side of the crowd, Depa flashed me a smile to let me know they were waiting for me.
"Yeah but" He slurred a few words out, but I couldn't make them out "If I don't have it, someone else will"
"Well what if no one had it?" I asked "Just don't worry about it, I can give it to someone in charge so it doesn't get misused"
There was a crash as another colleague fell out of the ceiling just by us, he rolled off one of the desks before picking himself back up.
"Holy fucking shit mate" The one with the crowbar said "You good?"
His friend let out a moan and set right off to where they were climbing up into the ceiling again.
"Yeah I'm having a go at that" He said, handing me the crowbar "You take it mate" and then ran off.

Now a trio, we made our way back across the office, in one of the quiet bits between the partying, Emma stopped, and took in some deep breaths. Crowbar in hand, I had a look around, nobody else was in sight.
"What was going on back there?" Depa said, an arm around Emma.

“I don’t know it was like” Emma paused to take in another breath “I just went off with one of my mates cause they said they were gonna have a chill out there, and it was fun at first, but then that guy with a crowbar appeared, and like there was a bunch of them surrounding me”

“I think you’re still in shock hun”

“And they started making jokes, about, like” Emma sniffled a bit.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to”

Emma shook her head, as Depa came in for a hug.

“It’s alright” Depa said, patting her on the back “Bunch of people are going to the top floor to have a chill time, away from those idiots. Me and Jamie are going up there you can come along with us”

“That’ll be nice” Emma said, crying a bit.

“I should probably have a chat with Greg and Gill about the crowbar” I said “It’s a bit unsafe just having it lying about”

“Yeah and I’m a bit worried about those guys back there. Like Emma is clearly very upset” Depa said.

“I’m sure we can have a chat with those two”

“So chat with Gill and Greg and then go to the top floor, sounds like a plan?” Depa said, turning back to Emma “You’re good coming along with us?”

“I think Tessa and Andrea were already going to the top floor” Emma said “I can just head up there myself right?”

“Are you sure you’ll be alright?” Depa asked.

Emma nodded, wiping away a tear “Yeah, I can handle myself”

“Get there safe!” Depa said.

“Thanks for getting me out of that situation by the way” Emma said, making her way to the stairwell “You too Jamie!”

I gave Emma a little wave as she left, with just the two of us, and crowbar still in hand, we made our way back to the break out room.

Jamie B was lying on the ground, half awake, one of his eyes was half open, and he let out a bit of a laugh when he saw the two of us standing above him. Me and Depa exchanged a look, as our shirtless teammate writhed around on the ground.

Greg Havers had made a real scene of the break out room. What must have been the dance floor at one point had a pulsing mass of bodies, semi-naked, limbs frothing and feet scurrying.

“Do you see them?” Depa asked, trying to peer through the bodies.

Greg was there in the middle of the mass, heads above, arms raised above, his laughs seemed to be echoed among the bodies below “I can’t see Gill Powers” I said.

Jamie B stood up a little, some fluid dripping from his mouth.

“For fucks sake Jamie B” Depa said “What on earth has gotten into you?”

“Is everything okay here?” I asked him, his wide eyes now level with me. He let out a smirk, and then a bit of a laugh, before making his way over to Greg, half running and half stumbling. Still holding the crowbar in hand, I figured whatever state Greg was in, I’d assume it wasn’t a good one for constructive feedback about safeguarding and sexual harassment.

Depa had a nervous look on her face, looking around for Gill, she'd gone missing, and realised she was the only woman in the room. Well, I thought for a moment, never mind actually.

"Do you think we could ask him where Gill is?" Depa said.

"Ask who?" I replied, as Greg emerged from his mass, and with eyes leering, he walked right up to me, and eyes pressed to mine, licked his lips.

"Hello?" I asked, backing away slightly.

"Oh here's a lovely one" Greg gleamed, pushing into me once more, "Oh but what do we have here?" he backed off to the side, right into Depas face "Aren't you lovely?"

"Do you fucking mind?" Depa said, pushing Greg away "Personal space??"

"Alright love?" Greg said, panting now, leaning back into her.

"Hey can you back off from her?" I said to Greg "And where's Gill?"

"Oh where's Gill?" Greg let out a chuckle, before turning back to the crowd arching around us "Hey everyone, he wants to know where Gill is?" There was a knowing laugh among the crowd, an in joke I guess I wasn't in on "Why, I guess he wants a turn himself?" The laugh turned into a roar as Greg turned back to Depa "But why? After all, your girl here seems pretty nice"

"Jamie" Depa tugged at my sleeve "We should get out of here?"

"I'm sorry love" Greg pushing himself into Depa now "Louder for us at the back please?"

“Can you back off from her?” I said, pushing Greg away.

“Come on mate” Greg said “It’s the end of the world, couple of hours we’re all getting fried to a crisp, and you’re still worried about what, the consequences of your actions?”

“Leave her alone!” I said.

Depa took another step, back towards the stairwell behind us.

“Why? Want her all to yourself?” Greg smirked, taking another step towards us “Bit selfish if you ask me”

I stood my ground. Greg’s step forward turned into a run. Depa hurled a fuck off or two as she kept out of his grasp. I pushed myself between them. Greg pushed back. He threw a punch. Ducking out the way, I raised the hand with the crowbar in it and swung it back down at him.

Greg lay down on the floor, blood on the carpet. Laughing as the crowd massed around him, it’s eyes glaring, lips leering, a faint roar from everywhere and nowhere that had seemingly always been there.

“What did you just do?” Depa said, the both of us taking our paces back as the mass surged forth.

We watched the mass as it picked Greg up, back into his place at it’s helm, and we watched as two words left his mouth.

“Get em”

3

The stairs couldn't move under our feet fast enough. Turning back to the horde rushing up behind us, a limb grabbed Depa, she escaped as I swung the crowbar somewhere into the mass the limb came from, Depa ran ahead. Turning around the corner, I ran up the next flight, swinging back at the mass, a head bloody, an arm cracking, one torso thudding into another.

"Jamie" She shouted from above "Keep going up dickhead" I ran, feeling fingers caress my heel as the mass of bodies panted behind me. The worst thing wasn't the smell, of piss and beer and sweat, the thudding of feet and bodies pressing against each other. It was the noise, the roar, the way you couldn't tell where one of its voices stopped and another started, one voice moaning out in anger, in pain, in desire. That whoever was a chattering colleague this morning was something else now. One singular thing now.

Depa was at the helm of a cleaning trolley that had been left at a landing. Waiting for me to clear her, she pushed it down the stairs, and we caught a brief breath as we watched it crash head first into the front of the mass, watching it's constituent parts splash over the sides and back down the stairs.

Mop in hand, Depa swung it down the stairs, cleaning up anything the cart had missed, the body left unscathed snapped by the stick in the neck. I bashed a colleague climbing back over the handrails, was that Jamie K from HR? I thought, watching his vacant face drop back into the mass. I'd never seen

him without his glasses, or up close, he would sometimes do a talk at the enrichment sessions the company runs.

"Bastard!" Depa shrieked, jabbing the mop into another chest, slamming into another side and back down on a head, but the hands lept onto the mops ends, Depa pulled back, just to realise she was left with the stick as I watched the brush be swallowed up.

"Run?" Depa asked.

"Run!" I replied

Shoving the stick through the handles of the doors, blocking it, Depa stepped back from the stairwell entrance.

"What's the quickest way for them to get to us now?" I said.

"Well they'd have to go up a floor and then back down" Depa said, taking a step back, before taking a deep breath in "What the fuck is wrong with that lot? Like I get we're being nuked but they don't have to lose their god damn minds like this."

"We've got a couple more hours left right?"

"I think. I dunno" Depa buried her head in her hands "I shouldn't have left Emma on her own, we gotta find her Jamie"

The mass pushed the doors open as far as the stick let them, fingers pouring out of the crack, the moans shrieking into focus. Watching the eyes peering out, Depa ran over, kicking the door shut, blood splatting as the fingers burst off their hands.

"We should stay moving" I said.

"I shouldn't have let Emma go off on her own" Depa said "I don't want to think what those mindless fucking dicks will do to her if they find her"
"Get a weapon, find Emma, go to the top floor, wait it all out, whatever happens. Sound like a plan?"
"Yeah" Depa said, eyes fixed on the red stains dripping down the door "Let's get moving"

This deep into the office half the lights were failing now, the twilight of the world outside did little to illuminate our way, so we pressed forward in near darkness. Silence was around every corner when we came across a body lying on the ground before us.
"Shit" Depa said under her breath, rushing over to the body, crouching down we turned it over "Tessa?" She almost cried, recognising her face. Tessa's skin was lukewarm, a rectangular bruise at the side of her head, you could see the indentation marked red on her skull. She had a sad, still look in her eyes, gazing at something we couldn't see. She wasn't breathing.
Depa placed her hand on her chest, then her neck, then back to her chest, before sitting up.
"She doesn't have a pulse" Depa said.
"Oh" I said, not knowing what else I could say, I thought for a moment about what weapon could have made such a blocky mark on her, but it didn't seem like the right thing to say.
Some of the fluorescents flickered on for a moment, scatterings of cold light spreading across the floor in waves. In the moments the lights were on, I saw a trail of blood lead away from where Tessa lay, spots treading outwards, to a pair of feet smirking at us from across the floor. It was him, the guy I got the

crow bar from, although now it was a cricket bat swinging in his hands, stained crimson across one of the sides.

"Depa get up" I said, shoving her shoulder, we both slowly stood in silence, watching him move closer from afar.

"You doing alright mate?" He shouted.

"What the hell happened to her?" I shouted back, gesturing to Tessa, lying stiff on the ground.

"She was a bitch" He replied, the shout almost turning into a laugh.

"What?"

"A bitch!"

"Answer the question what happened to her?"

"She's dead mate don't worry about it!"

I gestured again to Tessa's body "How is this not worrying *mate*, it sure is worrying me *mate*, I'd appreciate it if you started explaining why she's dead and your cricket bat has a fuckton of blood on it *mate*"

The guy holding the bloody cricket bat shrugged, seemingly bemused by my line of questioning. "You know where all the girls went?" He asked.

"Well they're not here they all went…" I looked over to Depa, she'd paced back a fair distance, I saw the fear in her eyes as she shook her head "They are not here, and I think you should just calm down"

"Oh come on, it's the end of the world? We're all gonna die in a bit! Who gives a shit?" He said, taking another couple steps towards us "Like come on, just chill out, what's your name anyway?"

"I'm Jamie" I said, taking a step back, Depa disappearing behind one of the pillars "Jamie C"

"Oh mate same, Jamie G, you know there's a lot of Jamies here you know, it's hard to keep track of all of us you know"

"Yes I've figured" I looked around the floor, one eye on him and another on a way out.

"You know about the Jamie code right?"

"No" I lied.

"Well all the Jamies here have each others backs right, so like you do me a favour I'll do you one back you get me?"

I gripped the crow bar tighter in my hand.

"And all I wanna know is where all these ladies went to" He continued "It's the end of the world mate, just wanna have a good time"

"I think you should put the weapon down"

He stumbled for a bit as he stepped over Tessas body, "Mate the fucks wrong with you" He was shouting even louder now "Only used it against her?"

"You killed her?"

"She was being a fucking bitch, why do you care? Had to deal with her while the rest of the girls ran off"

Teeth clenched, I held the bar firm in my grip, I was starting to walk back into the twilight, not far to the windows now I thought.

"The fuck are you hiding from me?" He spat, picking up pace "You know where they are, you lying fuck, where the fuck are they?" and with that he started to charge.

Counting the seconds, I ducked to the side as the bat swung down on where I was, running through an aisle, I heard a grunt as he turned to give chase, I kept as many steps between us as I could. Shooting behind

a pillar as the bat bashed against it, watching flecks of white paint fly off, I ran for it, clear of him now I saw him steady himself, his gaze locking back onto me. Grasping the crow bar in my hand, I threw it, as hard as I could. And watching it spin in mid air, it hit him, square in the face. Too drunk to care about the pain, I watched his startled look nearly return to anger when a water cooler bottle landed squarely at the back of his head. Jamie G fell on his face, knocked out cold.

"Depa!?" I exclaimed, watching my friend smile at me from the other side of Jamie Gs unconscious body "You came back?"

"Of course I would silly" She laughed back.

I walked over to where the crowbar was as Depa picked up the cricket bat, admiring it in her hands.

"It's what Tessa would have wanted" She said, she tried out the bat, feeling how it felt in her hands as she swung it through the air "You know my dad's really into cricket, remember him getting the whole family to play it"

"That's cute" I said, smiling along with her. I watched a whole pain of emotions spread across her face for a second or two, before she looked back at me.

"We need to save Emma"

"Then get to the top floor?" I said, the words drowned out by a roar bellowing from the far side of the office, bursting through a thin dividing wall "Shit"

"Is that it? The swarm?"

"I don't wanna find out"

"Get moving" Depa said.

I nodded, and we ran. Past the empty desks and potted plants. It started as a shaking, a slight reverberation, stabbing at every step we took, till the lines in the dark blurred and blurred, till we stood there, adrift, under the pale green glow of an emergency exit sign at the end of a narrow corridor. I waved the crowbar at the pair of doors in front of us. I pushed but they wouldn't move, and there were no handles to pull.

"I think its one of those automatic doors" Depa said.

"Of course, the power's out, we gotta find another way around" I said

"I can't hear them" Depa said, both of us turning back into the dark we had just run through. Looking out into what must have turned into night, I couldn't see a thing, this deep into the office, not till it stepped into the green glow with us.

Depa swung first, hitting whatever was at the head of the swarm. Bare bodies surged forth, stabbing at one and swiping at the next, hands bit, teeth clawed and the legs kept lurching towards us. The Bodies that got past us kept running, bursting through the doors behind us. I couldn't tell who, but the exit sign was smashed into bits, for a second the whole office was illuminated into light, the swarm stretched back, a sea of screeching heads, till pitch black returned. As the surge came and came, as the flow of bodies reached full force, I ran into Depa, grabbing her and shoving us into an alcove in the side of the wall. Beside us the swarm screeched onwards. Holding our breath for a moment longer, the crush turned to a torrent as bodies flung through the corridor, before the doors, like a sick joke, closed after the last of it had passed.

We both stepped out, over what bodies lay in the corridor, to find another way around.

We found a meeting room tucked down a dead end, out of sight. I placed a chair against the door, so it wouldn't open, as Depa went to the water cooler at the end of the room. Surprised it still worked, we sat in the night with our plastic cups at the table and stared out the wide windows into what was left of the world outside.

"For a second I thought those were stars in the sky" Depa said.

"You see them arc across the sky if you look closely" I replied.

"I just realised, I'm never going to see the sun rise again"

I sipped some water, looking at the glow beyond the horizon.

Depa let out a sigh "And I'm never going to see my family again, I was going to go visit them this weekend, as we hadn't spoken much recently. I think I told you about my sister's wedding?"

"You said it ended up pretty stressful?"

"And last time I spoke to my mum it was this huge argument about something stupid, like seating arrangements and the cakes being late and" Depa paused for a moment as a bird flew past the window "And I'm never going to see her again now"

We both sat there in silence for a moment.

"What about you?" She asked "Any regrets?"

"No not really"

"What?"

I looked over at Depas gawking face.

“None?” She said.
“I guess not”
“Seriously? Nothing, no messages you never sent, lovers that got away, dreams never achieved? Nothing?”
“I suppose”
“Jamie, there has to be something you want, something you’re going to miss”
I took a moment to think about what I did want from life, which was funny, considering how whatever I did want I wasn’t going to be able to achieve it now
“I’ve always wanted to be a girl”
Depa closed her eyes, put her hands to her face, and then opened them as she burst out laughing “What?”
“Well, you did ask”
“You wish you were a girl?”
I nodded yes.
“Really?”
I nodded again.
“Jamie, after everything that’s just happened you’d rather be a woman?”
I nodded once more.
“Alright” Depa said, staring back out to the window. Before us a body fell down outside from up high, before a thud was heard down below.
“Did he just jump off the building?” Depa asked.
“I think so” I replied “People must be losing their minds”
“It’s a shame, you’d think people would want to stick it out till the end”
I nodded in solemn agreement.
“Then again” she said “Might be worth just getting it over with you know”

I let out a bit of a laugh “Bit morbid” I looked around at the door, wondering how long we’d been here for “Then again we should get a move back on”
“Fair enough”

I crept up the stairwell in the dark, the one on the other side of the building. I periodically peered back down over the handrail, down to Depa the floor below, her torch phone glow giving the only illumination, to give her a nod it was all clear. Skittering up the steps I made it to the next level, and she made it to the level I was just on, holding both the crowbar and the cricket bat in her hand. Step by step, the noise from floor 13 came into painful focus. Leaning back over the handrail once again, I gave her the signal to stay there, and tip toed up to peek at the scene above us.

Head poking just above the ceiling of floor 12, and the ground of floor 13, I looked through the glass doors to the scene beyond. There was a fight between two of the men, not that I could recognise either of them, or any of the crowd cheering it on. The two fighters threw their flailing fists at one another, almost melting into each other at points, the crowd swarmed around them, pulling them apart and throwing them back together, the swarm collapsed around the pair, and I couldn’t make out the two fighters, or at least where the fighting stopped and the audience began.

As the crowd surged over to the side, I spotted a pair of legs sticking out from under a desk. I thought her legs were bare at first, but there was a short skirt she was wearing, or at least a longer one pulled up.

Watching her in the half light, I saw two men stumble over to the woman, both of them laughing at the sight of her, I saw one of the men crouch down and place a hand on her open and motionless legs.

"Psst" I heard Depa whisper from below. She'd crept her way up another floor, and I crept back down to where she was. "What's going on up there?" She asked.

"Seems pretty rowdy, doubt we could fight our way through"

"So no sign of Emma?"

"No, and I think if we went up there to look, it would create too much of a scene, they're just fighting each other for the hell of it, so we shouldn't give them a reason"

"Fair enough, we can look for another route, or wait this out?"

"Depends, we can have a think, but there's gonna be a fight either way"

"Hold on" Depa said, handing the crowbar back to me "Gotta stay prepared!"

Taking the crowbar back with a slight smile, we heard a ding behind us as the lift doors open up, and our team member, Jamie B, stumbled out, the lift light behind him. Falling down to the ground beside us, he picked himself upto a kneel on the ground, letting out a laugh as he looked at us.

"Hey" Jamie B managed to slur out "Think I'm on the wrong floor" He laughed "You lot having a fun time?"

"Where's Emma?" Depa asked him.

"On floor 13?" Jamie B said "That's where the party is! You heading there? Got a bit lost you know"

“No we’re finding Emma then avoiding that floor” I said “Where did you see her?”
“Oh yeah I got off with her” A smile appeared on the other Jamies face “She got off with a bunch of guys”
“What do you mean?” Depa said.
“I don’t know there was like a bunch of us” Jamie B said.
“Is Emma okay?”
“I dunno, she just lay there”
“Jamie” I said “Is Emma okay? Is she well?”
“Well” Jamie B responded, he rolled over to his front halfway, looking like he was about to be sick, but with a bit of a giggle he managed to pull himself back up “She wasn’t saying much, I guess, like she was at first but like not afterwards?”
“What was she saying?” Depa said.
“Stuff I guess” He said.
“Did she agree to what was going on?” I said
“She didn’t put up a fight, like there was a whole argument going on at the time but she didn’t join in you know?” He replied.
“What was the argument about?” Depa asked.
“I think a bunch of guys were flirting with Emma you know, they got like territorial or something” He replied.
“And did Emma flirt back?” I asked.
Jamie B sat there for a bit on the ground, eyes staring vacantly at the wall.
“Okay so a bunch of people were flirting with Emma?” I asked.
“Yeah, kinda” He said.
“And did Emma, at any point, flirt back, or try to get off with any of the guys there?”

“Well no, but she wasn’t really talking much, like after a couple guys, she just lay there, but like, we were all doing it, you know”

“Jamie B, I’m going to ask you some questions, and I want you to give me a very clear yes or no answer, did you get off with Emma?”

“Yeah” Jamie B said with a smirk.

“And before you got off with her, did you say anything to her?”

“Well she wasn’t saying anything at that point you know, it was pretty intense, but like I get you know what I mean, Jamie C, right?”

“So is that a no?”

“Yeah”

“Okay now Jamie B, again I want a clear yes or no, do you think Emma wanted to get off with you?”

“Well it wasn’t just me” There was a thud as the cricket bat slammed at the side of Jamie Bs head. There was another thud as the bat came down, Depa let out a shriek, whacking back down on his head, again and again. As I watched the blood pool around in the cracks in his skull as his body lay on the ground, I thought about how me and Depa and Emma and Jamie B had all been co-workers this morning. Depa let out another cry, the bat came swinging down at what was left of his body.

“Depa” I said, signalling for her to stop “Noise”

Breathing hard, she rested the bat on the floor, and I watched the blood drip off it joining the puddle now formed around the body. I thought about crying, or about how this seemed an appropriate time to cry. After all I hadn’t cried in quite a while, so I suppose it would be nice to do so while I still could.

“Lift still works” Depa said.
“Some power left?” I asked.
“We can take the lift to the top”
“And Emma?”
“I fucked up. I should’ve never let her out of my sight”
I nodded, trying to smile at her, but she stood there, still as a stone, eyes somewhere else.

Pressing the button to make the lift go as high as it could, me and Depa watched the doors close behind us. The lift made a ding, and then a creak as it made it’s way up the building. In the half emergency lights we didn’t say anything, just felt the lift move at its reduced pace. We felt it tremble past floor 12, when the lift sped up for a second, and then slowed back down. As the counter ticked over to 13, the lift came to a stop. Me and Depa exchanged glances, and with our still toughened grips, we raised out weapons, took in a deep breath, and let the half emergency lights illuminate the world outside.
“Emma?” Depa said, looking at the figure across from us “Emma!” Depa leapt out the lift, taking Emma by the hand, and bringing her back inside. Poking my head out the lift too, I checked there was no one else around outside, lurking in the dark. Slamming the close door button, I looked over at Depas arm around Emma, the bat now resting on the ground, and the lift lurching back on it’s way up.
“You’re safe now okay” Depa said softly “No one is going to hurt you as long as I’m with you, okay?”
I heard Emma start to cry, her face buried in Depas shoulders.

"And Jamie C is here too, we're going to the top floor where everything is going to be okay, I promise"

From the other side of the lift I looked over at Emma as she looked up to me, and I tried to give her a comforting smile, as much as she could smile through her tears. Depa brushed the hair out of her eyes, and she started to cry once more. Emma wasn't wearing any trousers. Taking each other's hands I saw Depa mouth something to her, but I couldn't make out what she was saying.

The lift didn't go all the way to the top floor, but it took us close enough. Stepping out, I checked the way was clear, and Depa followed, shining the way with her torch and leading Emma along by the hand. Back into the stairwell, in the dark they all looked the same, I thought I must've of lost track of the 3 or 4 we had in the building. I was going to lead the way up, but there was a noise down below, a slight flickering. Me and Depa looked at each other, our grips tightened, then gazed back down into the void. Some of the lights, floors down would turn on for a second or two, in those moments we could make out the shadows cast. Of limbs flying and heads roaring, and the flickering turned into the pattering of feet and a horde stampeding up the stairs.

"I'll fight them off" I said to Depa "You get her up there"

"I'll be right back" She responded, and with that she took off with Emma. Bracing myself, the lights flickered on, and I saw the bodies and limbs flying forth. I ran down to meet them, the crowbar swung and struck a body, only seeing the blood splatter as

the lights turned on for another moment. In the fury of the dark, I heard the grunts, the snaps, the stamps. The screaming I never let too close, the bodies I walked over, and the ones that kept rushing. The swarm seemed tired, in pain, as if the hysteria was soon to wash off. But it still came, it's hunger, nearly full, still had its gaping jaws appear for a moment or two.

One of it's limbs struck me, something to the chest, I fell backwards. When the lights flickered on one of it's bodies was pressed down on top of me. And for a second it stopped, I thought, as a smile appeared on its face, that maybe some humanity had returned. It bit me, on the side of the neck, on my cheek, and nose, and lips, and it's hands and nails dug into my sides. Yelling out in pain, the rest of the swarm came to a stop, it stood around us two, leering, cackling.

The body on top of me came up, smiling with my blood still on his lips. The fluorescent lights staying on as I could see the pleasure in his eyes, the laughing as I tried to struggle out of his grip.

Lights started to flickering off and on again, and the bodies started to run in a panic, as one by one I heard a thud, the bodies falling one by one. The head above me batted off it's neck as Depas cricket bat swung above me.

"Hey" Depa said, pulling to my feet "You good?"

"As good as I can be" I replied, blood still foaming at the marks it left. There was a shriek from a few floors below. We both looked down the stairs. "Think there's someone down there"

"We can't leave her down there"

I picked up the crow bar lying on the floor “Emma’s safe?”

“Yep. You sure you’re feeling good?”

“Yep” And without a word more we ran down to the shrieks. Step by step the lights started to flicker on for good, till a harsh white light touched all that we saw. Turning around the last corner, we saw Gill Powers. The swarm had already gotten to her.

4

You could give them your all, every last ounce of you, till there was nothing left, but what if they wanted more, what if their wanting never stopped? She'd always resented them, the Men. How her brothers were allowed to be smart and loud and angry instead of her. How she studied and studied but the teachers picked their questions over hers. How for every step she took up the corporate ladder, all the pain and frustration and holding it in, there was a man who almost ascended by accident.

So she kept at it, she gave it everything she had. Out of pride, envy, the satisfaction of proving them all wrong. She knew this was their world, she dreamed of the look on their faces when she stood atop it.

But something she noticed, along the way, is that all the men did notice the work she put in, and because none of them had asked her to do all of this, they thought she did this without complaint. So the men came in with their demands, and she accepted them, and came back within 3 to 5 working days with the job done at a satisfactory level. And the men didn't have so much as a look on their face, like they knew she'd one day be above them all, just a quick thank you, knowing they could always depend on her. You could give them your all, every last ounce of you, till there was nothing left, but what if they wanted more, what if their wanting never stopped?

The blood dripped down the stark white walls. The only sound was Depa breathing in and out, as we sat on the steps of the stairs. Bodies lay at our feet, the

groans silenced, somewhere beneath the battered limbs and smiling heads we figured Gill still lay. We couldn't save her, it was too late, but I didn't feel like being angry any more. Depa let out a single tear as she spoke.

"Growing up my parents would always take me to a temple across the street, and my favourite thing there was this dance class. So whenever my parents told me they were taking me to the temple, they said it was for the dance class, and then half the time I'd get there and find out we were going there to pray or something else 8 year old me found utterly boring." Depa let herself smile for a moment "And I'd get so upset, I'd throw a tantrum right there on the pavement outside as the rest of the community walked in. The funny thing was that I'd never learn, they'd get me every time, to this day my dad still makes fun of how it took me years to figure it out. But I got older, and I guess it's one of those things that comes with age, the lessons you can only learn yourself. Started to pay attention to all the stories they used to tell, and it was the stories of martyrdom that always stuck to me. Stories of these martyrs who'd die for their faith, heroes who'd be tempted with all the wealth in the world, who'd stare death right in the face, and they'd stand their ground, never giving an inch, but it was just that, stories. I never knew what martyrdom meant until…" Depa buried her face into my shoulder "I'm sorry"

"Depa" I said, taking her hand "Depa stay with me" But she was already gone, drifting off into a deep sleep. Holding her up as her body slouched against me, I tried waking her up, but I couldn't, the blood

pooling at our feet, I put one arm around her shoulders and the other under her knees, and lifted us both up. And so I set off, making our way to the top floor.

I felt her weight in every step, the cold light all seeping into one blur, one thing, one walk up the stairs until I turned and walked up some more. In the end it all seemed to collapse in on itself. I stood in front of the door, the one that Tessa told us about, the one she never reached. I knocked on it with the back of my hand.

After a second or two of something heavy behind the door being moved, Andrea cracked it open, ever so slightly. She saw Depa and swung it open.

"Is she doing okay?" Andrea asked, reaching to take her out of my arms.

"She drifted off after a fight, is Emma with you?" I replied, letting my friend be passed over through the entrance.

"Emma reached us about ten minutes ago, she's safe, she said you and Depa saved her"

"It's the least I could have done" I nodded, Andrea passed Depa along to the other women in the safe house, taking her away. I heard a noise, a terrible thing down from below.

"You'll be okay?" Andrea asked me, still at the door.

"I can draw them away" I replied.

"Good luck" She replied, and shut the door. I stood there in silence for a moment more, listening to something heavy being pushed back. There were some other doors on the top floor, they didn't seem so safe, and the swarm, loud as ever, seemed to be ever

closer. Picking one of the doors, any of them, I set off. Wasn't too long now, I thought.

Maintenance shafts and air vents seemed all there was crammed along here. Somehow the lights still glowed and the fans still turned. Ducking under the pipes and gauges, crouching at times, I found a room tucked away at the side, one that almost seemed made for people. Jackson was sitting on a chair, looking out the window and across the night sky, he must have noticed me entering, but only have a stiff grunt.

"You made it!" I said.

Jackson didn't move, he just looked out the window.

"Me and Depa found our friend Emma, they're both safe now"

"Horrible, horrible things I saw" Jackson said, his voice gruff, and tense.

"I know" I said "I saw them too. Me and Depa had to fight loads of them. You'd think people would know better than that"

"If I weren't so old. I would have fought them myself. I'm happy you did the right thing. Pardon me, I never got your name?"

"Jamie" I said "Just Jamie now"

"Jamie, that's a strong name, do you like it?"

"No, not really, it's just the name I was given"

"Well Jamie, I feel bad, see earlier I just spoke about myself, that was very rude of me, tell me about yourself?"

"I'm not really sure what to say, to be honest"

"Don't you have a woman in your life?"

"I suppose so"

“And what’s her name?”

“I hadn’t picked one yet”

“Oh my!” Jackson burst out laughing “You know that’s the funny thing about life, you spend it all being oh so indecisive, life seems so busy, doing this and that, you know, but as I got older, all the little things, the things that would drive me crazy, I found they didn’t matter, and the things that did matter, I’d forgotten about. It’s like, you don’t know whether to laugh or cry, at how we seem to forget about the really important things, the things, deep down, we knew we wanted all along” Jackson let out a slight laugh “It’s funny, Jamie, you seem sad, but not, well, distraught or heartbroken, do you see what I mean?”

“No”

“Well normally, I’d say that this is a thing you’d learn when you get older but” Jackson let out a sigh “But, you know. You don’t look like you’re about to die Jamie”

“How can you tell?”

“Well you’re not sad the world is ending, it’s like you’re sad it’s another day in the office, and don’t take this the wrong way Jamie, but I’ve seen this look on another man’s face, it is as if you are not afraid to die, because you were never really living in the first place”

I stood there for a moment, leaned against the wall, trying to remember all the plans I had, the dreams I’d once dreamt, but they weren’t there any more, or at least anywhere it would hurt to remember. The noise started again, the swarm must be getting closer, looking up outside the window, Jackson noticed it too.

“They are back” Jackson said “Evil, evil people. I hope hell awaits them”

“How do you get to the roof from here?” I asked.

“Go back to the top of the main stairs, it’s the grey door with a push bar, the stairs behind that go to the roof”

Out in the open of the night air, a cool breeze hung below the stars I could make out. The glow was still there, below the horizon, and if you looked closely, some of the stars weren’t really stars. You could see them, high up in space, making their arcs, their adjustments, their paths back down to annihilate wherever they landed. Every now and again, you could see one of them, for want of a better word, burst, one of them would be intercepted, or hacked, or whatever the militaries of the world were doing in the eleventh hour. And when one of them burst, one amongst the thousands, it was a blip, and faded as soon as it appeared.

Standing out over the edge, I looked back over to the entrance from which I’d come up here now. It was Greg Havers, I hadn’t seem him for a while, he was alone. He didn’t say a word, over the distance between us, I could feel his glare. As he sprinted over to me, I let him, I took a step or two from the edge, and faced him. We both came to a stop, I thought about saying something to him, but he had as much hate as when I has seen him last, he let out some kind of growl, or bark, or some other noise, but it fell flat, alone in the cold night air.

And then it was as if the sky was filled with a thousand suns, and we lost each other in the blaze.

Closing my eyes, I let it rain down, the light, the warm heat, came first like a soft hug, and then breeze gave way to a wind, and the wind blew hot. I closed my eyes, and breathed in, and then out. I thought about Depa, and how I hoped she was okay, in a way I was glad we made it to the end together. It seemed like a waste to have regrets now, I guess this was as old as I was going to get. Breathe in, breathe out.

5

After a moment or two, I realised I was still alive. Opening my eyes, the city was still here, I was still standing on the roof of my office, and Greg was standing next to me, still naked, staring up in disbelief. The sky above was still bursting with light, fainter now, as one by one the little arcs across the sky were terminated in a flash of light.

"Greg" I said, looking over at him as words started to form at the tip of his tongue "We're going to live"

Liam Said It Wasn't My Fault

I can explain, not justify really, but I promise I can explain. I know I can't undo it, and I doubt I'll ever leave this prison, but I'm alone. People don't even want to listen, so please? Let me explain? I'm sorry I should just get on with it, and it may at first sound like I'm just rambling but please, I can explain.

When I was about 5 years old, my parents had a big plant pot at the back of the garden. My parents always told me to be careful around it, as it may wobble and fall over. My older brother, he's a few years older than me, would give it a jostle or something small when our parents weren't looking. He always knew exactly how to do it without being caught.

One day, when we were out playing in the garden, he was jostling it again. I told him to stop, but he kept pushing it, ever so slightly. There was one push, where I thought it was going to fall over, so I gave it a push the other way.

As my brother stepped aside, the plant pot fell over, away from me, shattering into a million pieces as the dirt spread across half the garden. When I turned around my parents were there, they'd just seen it all. They told me off, yelling about how stupid I was, how it was all my fault. Frustrated, I didn't know what to say, so I just cried and yelled and I remembered the grin on my brother's face once he knew he'd gotten away with it.

At secondary school, my parents would go on about my brother's grades, he did so well in his GCSEs and then his A Levels. When the offers came in for all these medical degrees they couldn't quite believe it. They were so proud of him, he'd worked so hard for this, they told me, it was entirely his fault, and he should be proud of himself.

Naturally I was to follow in his footsteps. I had to get his grades, I had to get his medical degree, so when I didn't get his grades, when I got a sole offer from a nursing school, they told me this was my fault. Sitting at the kitchen table, the pair of them staring at the letter, they seemed so angry at me, upset, insulted. There was nothing I could do to appease them. I accepted the offer and left home for uni.

There was a brief time at uni I thought things were starting to change. I went on a night out with everyone in my halls, I thought they'd be my friends, we swapped numbers, I kissed some boys, but nothing stuck. As the winter rolled in I began to drift away, I wouldn't leave my room for days. Everything felt so aimless, as if I'd just exist from one day to the next. I felt like I was sliding out of myself. I could sense something bad was happening to me, so I figured I should do something, anything really. As a distraction, I threw myself into my studies, so I wasn't hiding in my room, I'd hide in the lectures, or hide in the library. Working late nights, so I'd be exhausted when I got home. I'd then throw myself into bed, no time left to think.

It was one of those late nights walking back to my halls, it must've been a Saturday as there was a queue outside one of the clubs in town, across the road from me. A girl in the queue called out my name, there were some girls I must've known from somewhere, in my course or something. I nearly waved at them, but for some reason I couldn't. Looking back, I'm sure if I'd walked over and asked if I could join them they would have let me. But I couldn't, for all the ways my feet were stuck in the ground and all the words I would never say, I just didn't know how to ask, to even say hello.

Back in my room that night, I could have cried myself to sleep. I thought how nice it would be, to feel some of my emotions for once, but this was just a brief break in the grey that was my life.

My parents came to my graduation. They told me it was just like my brothers, and how his was a really fancy affair, they were so proud of him that day. I moved back into my old room and started work as a trainee nurse at a hospital an hour and a half away. The pay wasn't great, but I told myself the experience would be good, it would only be this way the first year or two. I never liked the winters, the way my fingers would freeze as I waited at the bus stop. The way I never saw the sun, just the long cold nights and the stark white hospital lights. It didn't feel any different though, it all just amounted to the same grey I'd always known.

At Christmas my brother came home and brought his girlfriend along. She was a nurse too, like me. My parents loved her, they said that her and my brother

were perfect for each other. I could see them all chat the night away from the other side of the room.

With the new year I'd managed to scrape enough money to move into a houseshare. The agents had described it as cosy, there must have been at least 6 other people there, including a couple, but I never got to know them that well. I remember once I came home late one day to find an argument in the kitchen, something about washing up and the dishes piling up. I realised I couldn't remember a single one of their names, or even if I'd seen them before. None of them paid me any mind so I slipped by unnoticed.

Life continued on, I couldn't tell you of anything in particular happening, just a case of one season giving way to another, one year followed by the next. Then one day a baby died on my ward. She must've only been a few weeks old. It had been a busy shift, I'd only popped into the next room to help an old man out of his bed, I guess I didn't have enough time to be everywhere at once. It was very avoidable, if I'd been there a minute earlier I could have stopped it, pressed a button, released the drip feed, changed it for a new one. But I'd been there when I was there and when I was there it was too late.

In the minutes after, all I could remember was the rush. The doctors running in, the questions asked, the pulse checked over and over again. But no, she was gone, passed at a few weeks old. As soon as it started it was over. The tiny corpse was wheeled out, the reports filed, the parents notified and the quiet set back in.

Liam found me sitting in the staff room after my shift. Liam was one of the junior doctors who came in after I'd raised the alarm. Liam wanted to check up on me in person. Liam had asked all the medical questions then, functional matters, but he hadn't had the time to ask how I was coping, how I felt about it. Liam said it wasn't my fault. Liam said that these things happen, there's no point beating yourself up about it, and that we're all doing our best here. Liam made me a tea, sat down and asked me what I got up to, what my hobbies were, how my family was, and for most of the questions I was trying to avoid the fact that I didn't have much of an answer. Liam gave me a smile, we hugged, he made a joke which I said was funny, but I didn't laugh. Liam saw me off, making sure I was in a better state than when he found me, we hugged again and then I got the bus home.

Staring out the bus window, watching the reflections of the streetlights in the puddles, I started to find the words for how I felt. It was cold outside, but inside was warm, a warmth I'd never really noticed before, it was nice. Smiling at myself in the reflection, I would have kicked my legs back and forth if the seats allowed it.

I thought about the way Liam touched me. I'd forgotten I could be touched like that, I'd spent so long thinking that things like that only happened to other people. That I shouldn't even try to be loved, I should just accept being alone, but I never knew how to be loved, never realised what it took to get others to care. But this just happened to me, didn't it? There

was no planning or stressing or scheming, no sleepless nights puzzling over how to be what others wanted. Liam said it wasn't my fault.

I didn't see Liam much after that. That February was grey like all the others. We would pass in the corridor, I'd smile at him and he might smile back. He seemed busy so best not to bother him. Everything seemed to go back to how it was, the old routines came back anew as I commuted to work and back, watching the same streets and shops, wandering the same wards. The baby seemed like a bad dream, sometimes I could see her frail face in my dreams, smiling as she went. Liam was there by my side, arm around me as we watched her go.

One day, as I left my morning shift, Liam was there at the bus stop. Liam smiled at me and said hello. Liam and me chatted for a bit, joking about how we never have time to rest. Liam went on a bit about his life outside of work, things were rough between him and his girlfriend. Liam didn't want to end it because he still loved her. I didn't say much in response, just nodded along, I figured he needed a friend to talk things through with. My bus came and we said goodbye.

Sometimes I wonder what it's like to be in a relationship, to have someone by your side whatever happens, because you love each other apparently. I imagined what it's like to have someone love me despite everything, what it's like for someone else to be so much of your life there's no point trying to hide a thing. It felt strange to think about. I don't think I'd even know what to do in such a situation.

It was quiet in the neonatal ward, I was on another late shift, doing my rounds, checking up on the newborns. Liam had passed the window outside a while ago, I hadn't noticed him until he'd already passed. Figuring he was on another late shift, I thought about our chat at the bus stop, and how that was the last time we'd spoken.

One of the babies was about to die. Pretending I didn't see the readings in the red, I cleared one of the desks, collected some files, and moved them into the next room. Re-entering the neonatal ward, I did my checks of the newborns, starting at the opposite end of the room.

When I got to him the baby had already passed. I raised the alarm. The doctors came rushing in. Liam didn't join them. I responded to all their questions, saw them all check the baby's vitals, try every last option, but no, I had to sit and watch as they wheeled another lifeless body out of the ward and into the pale white light.

Liam found me after the shift, sitting in the same place he'd found me last. Liam said someone else had told him what happened, and how awfully unlucky I was. Liam gave me a hug, and this time I made sure it lasted, I made sure I cried, or at least tried to, make the sniffles and motions someone who's about to cry would make. Liam said it wasn't my fault.

Crying was something I must have forgotten how to do. My feelings were still there, I knew that because they were all I felt. There was a disconnect though,

between the inside and outside worlds. I liked Liam because he would always find a connection.

Liam said goodbye and I took the bus home. I thought about things I could say to Liam, about how I felt, but even if I found the right words to say, I don't think I could ever say them to his face.

In the spring my brother announced his engagement. My parents hosted a dinner to celebrate, the two of them made whole speeches about how proud they were. They spoke of weddings and grandchildren and I thought about Liam the whole time. Is that what they wanted? Me to bring a boyfriend home and announce we were spending the rest of our life together? If that's all they wanted they could have just told me. Sitting there in silence at the dinner table, I let the night drag on, finished my food, and then went home.

That night I had another dream about the baby. He was already dead, alone in the neonatal ward. Liam was by my side, we spoke about visiting my parents, but I didn't want to go. Liam said that was alright, he took my hand, and we walked out into the night. We took a bus that lead to a forest, and the forest stretched out far into the dark. The trees seemed so far apart, and so far from me. It looked cold, and I felt alone, Liam wasn't there anymore, just the dark stretching onwards. If it felt so familiar, why was I so scared?

The months rolled on, and I felt that Liam had forgotten about me. He didn't smile back at me in the corridor, or at least he tried to but not like he used to.

We barely spoke, when we did he said he was busy, he never had the time, he was figuring things out with his girlfriend. I missed him, but I didn't know what to do with these feelings.

It was quiet in the neonatal ward. The baby must have been barely a week old. I swapped out the new drip feed for an old one, and pinched her respiratory tube, so it settled slightly out of place. I collected some litter and used syringes and wandered out into the next room. When I came back she wasn't breathing.

The next time I saw Liam I was sitting in the dock. After three babies had passed away on one of my shifts, the hospital opened up an investigation. The third body had shown clear signs of it not being an accident, so they brought in the police. During the interview I froze, I was nervous, nobody had shown this much interest in me, words fell out in a jumbled mess. The second interview was much the same, I couldn't tell the truth, so the words fell out again, differently from before. They knew I was lying, I never learnt how to say otherwise, and that was all the evidence they needed.

Liam called me a monster, that I'd deceived him, manipulated him, cried fake tears to garner what sympathy I could. But I cried real tears then, in the court. I was alone, set apart, an aberration to be cast away, but as those tears came down, I didn't have to guess any more, I knew it for sure.

Give 2 Receive by Hollyhollyholly

An electrifying alternate rock album, with appearances from folk and noise, and basslines you can wag your tail to. So good they named her thrice! :3

https://hollyhollyholly.bandcamp.com/album/give-2-receive

Bacillus Anthracis And The Longest Night Of Your Life by Bacillus Anthracis

“a waning full moon behind the slightest cloud cover.
omens of what could never come.
stars of iterative constellations.
towers that hold up the sky.”

Blissful ambient dream pop <3

https://bacillusanthracis.bandcamp.com/album/bacillus-anthracis-and-the-longest-night-of-your-life

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Writing badly journal
is a new journal on the topic of transmisogyny and transfeminism.

Writing badly magazine
is by and for trans women

Writing badly journal
is a titular invitation to ask what transfeminist writing practices could be, an invitation to an écriture transféminine, an insistence on occupying position as literary method. is an invitation to transfeminine studies. is an invitation to transfeminist philosophy. is a belief in the fruitfulness of trans female subjectivities. is a home, with posterity, for transfeminine texts. is the paper branch of the transfeminist movement.

Writing badly magazine
is next released in print on March 20th, 2025.

https://writingbadly.substack.com
https://www.badly.press

My name's Jamie, or at least that's what others know me as. I was supposed to be coming out today. It wasn't supposed to be the end of the world, just another day at the office, until it was.

Watching the world burn before us, it's upto me, and my best friend Depa, as our coworkers lose their minds, to get to safety with one goal on our minds. Save Emma Stokes.

As chaos descends and blood runs thick, the battle of the sexes is about to turn into a bloodbath.

Plus three other short stories of (trans)feminist horror.

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